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CIA Director Favors Use of Journalists

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WASHINGTON—Despite sometimes heated opposition from an audience of newspaper editors, CIA Director Stansfield Turner said Thursday that his agency will consider using journalists for intelligence purposes when the desired results cannot be obtained any other way.

In a question-and-answer session at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Turner said he did not understand why news organizations would object to their employees working for the CIA.

"What you are saying is that if you accept an assignment from me to get some information that can be very vital to our country, that you have lost your freedom," Turner said. "I don't understand that."

"If you slant the news because you are on our payroll, that's bad . . . but it is your choice whether a relationship with us, providing information to us, somehow profanes your work," he said.

"I am sorry, I don't understand the connection that you make between serving your country and being free," he added. "I think you can do both."

Eugene Patterson, editor of the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times, responded, "With due respect, I observe a failure of perception either on the part of you or on the part of us. I, for one, will attempt to elaborate on this in the pages of the St. Petersburg Times."

Patterson, New York Times Executive Editor A.M. Rosenthal and others complained that even the remote possibility of CIA connections makes it difficult for American foreign correspondents to operate overseas.

In the wake of congressional investigations of the CIA in the mid-1970s, then-CIA Director George Bush adopted a regulation prohibiting the agency from using full-time correspondents for U.S. newspapers and broadcast media for secret operations, either intelligence gathering or other purposes.

Shortly after he became intelligence chief in 1977, Turner modified the rule to permit the CIA to use full-time American journalists if such action was approved by the CIA chief. He said at the time that such exceptions would be extremely rare.

Turner said Thursday that in the last three years he had approved three plans to employ journalists in intelligence roles. He said that each of the plans fell through even though the journalists involved were "perfectly agreeable."

"The circumstances didn't mature as we had expected," he said. "When we found it wasn't really essential (to use the journalists), we backed off."

The same rules that restrict—but do not prohibit—the use of journalists also apply to clergymen and academics.